Tafsīr of the verse

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm

In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious,
the Ever Merciful

In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful

Historical background

Since ancient times, human beings have been familiar with the moral teachings contained in the Qur'ānic verse *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm*. It is quite possible that these teachings were revealed for the first time in such eloquent and succinct words in the Qur'ān, but they are so appropriate as a start for any worthwhile human undertaking that one cannot help thinking that they must have formed part of the very earliest teachings received by human beings from Allāh.

The Qur'ān tells us that when prophet Nūḥ, peace be upon him, asked the believers accompanying him to board the Ark, he said: ﴿وَقَالَ ٱرۡكَبُواْ فِيهَا بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ مَجۡرِىٰهَا وَمُرۡسَىٰهَآۚ إِنَّ رَبِّى لَغَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ﴾ *"Embark on it. In the name of Allāh shall be its course and its berthing. Surely, my Sustainer is the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful"* (Hūd, 11:41).

The letter sent by prophet Sulaymān, peace be upon him, to the Queen of Sheba also began with these blessed words. When the Queen read the letter, she said to her Council: ﴿قَالَتۡ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلۡمَلَؤُاْ إِنِّىٓ أُلۡقِىَ إِلَىَّ كِتَٰبٌ كَرِيمٌ ۝ إِنَّهُۥ مِن سُلَيۡمَٰنَ وَإِنَّهُۥ بِسۡمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ۝﴾ *"A truly distinguished letter has been delivered to me. It is from Sulaymān, and it reads: 'In the name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful'"* (an-Naml, 27:30).

A Prayer

This verse is not a simple statement of fact nor does it merely convey information. It is, like sūrah al-Fātiḥah, a prayer and a supplication that depicts the state of mind of a sensible, morally alert person as he or she sets out on any worthwhile undertaking. It is the natural yearning of human nature which the revelation has couched in words of incomparable beauty. One cannot think of any other combination of words to match the beauty of *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm* and which so adequately articulates our innate human need and emotions. When a person consciously and sincerely calls upon Allāh's help in these words, he is first and foremost warned that whatever he intends to do must accord with Allāh's will and correspond to His command; it must not contravene His will and law. When supplicating to Allāh in these words, a person uses two of His most important and beautiful names or attributes: *ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥīm*. An appeal to Allāh's grace and mercy ensures that Allāh will bless the supplicant and aid him in making his works flourish. If there are deficiencies in carrying out a task, Allāh will save him from any harmful consequences and enable him to accomplish it successfully. He will save him from the guile of Satan and make his efforts beneficial for him in this

life and a means of winning His pleasure in the life Hereafter. Any undertaking not accompanied by the supplication *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm* is therefore quite understandably deprived of all these advantages and blessings. The Messenger of Allāh, peace be upon him, said: "Any undertaking embarked upon without pronouncing *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm* is deprived of all blessings."

THE BLESSINGS OF *BISMILLĀH*

Apart from its general blessings touching on all areas of human activity, this supplication has a special significance in relation to reciting, understanding, and gaining an insight into the Qur'ān.

Firstly, pronouncing *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm* on taking up the study of the Qur'ān indicates our willing compliance with the Divine commandment given to the Prophet in the very first revelation: ﴿اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ﴾ *"Read in the name of your Sustainer Who created"* (al-'Alaq, 96:1).

Secondly, pronouncing it reminds us that the faculty of intelligence and articulate speech is the greatest single gift of Allāh to the human being. It is this human faculty – the faculty of comprehension and expression – that initially qualified the human being to be the recipient of Allāh's unique blessing – the Qur'ān. The Divine attribute, ar-Raḥmān, so prominent in this opening verse of the Qur'ān, emphasises God's unique gifts to the human being. In fact, the Qur'ān explicitly states that Allāh is "ar-Raḥmān", the Most Gracious, and out of His grace, He created the human being, endowed him with the faculty of speech, and then taught him the Qur'ān: ﴿الرَّحْمَٰنُ ۝ عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ ۝ خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ ۝ عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ۝﴾ *"The Most Gracious - ar-Raḥmān - He taught the Qur'ān. He created the human being, and taught him clear speech"* (ar-Raḥmān, 55:1-4).

Thirdly, this verse may be seen as an important affirmation and fulfilment of a special prophecy found in the earlier scriptures concerning the Last Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, as one who would instruct people "in the name of Allāh". In the Old Testament we read that Allāh commanded prophet Moses, peace be upon him, to warn his people about the coming of His last Prophet:

> The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – him you shall heed. And the Lord said to me ... 'I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him' (*Deuteronomy*, 18:15-19).

Fourthly, this verse reminds us that just as Allāh's grace – or His attribute of being "ar-Raḥmān" – is so prominently reflected in His revelation of the Qur'ān, so also does this grace alone hold the key to its inexhaustible treasures. It is through His mercy and grace alone that fresh avenues of knowledge will constantly open up, unravelling its mysteries and wisdom. Whatever difficulties a seeker might experience on this path of knowledge, these will be resolved by His grace as it guides the seeker's steps and helps, supports and sustains him along the path, while safeguarding him from pitfalls and errors, temptations and distractions, both from within and from without.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL NAMES OF ALLĀH

The verse contains three of the *asmā' al-ḥusnā* - the most beautiful names of Allāh - Allāh, ar-Raḥmān and ar-Raḥīm. We shall now briefly explain each of these.

Allāh

The word 'Allāh' is formed by prefixing the definite article '*Al*' to '*ilāh*' meaning a god with a small g. In the Arab tradition, the word Allāh has from the very earliest times been exclusively used for the One, Supreme God, Who alone is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The Arabs of the pre-Qur'ānic period used it in this very sense, for the One and True Creator of the human beings and the universe. Even the idolaters among them did not consider any of their so-called 'gods' in any way a rival or even comparable to Allāh. They admitted that Allāh alone is the Creator of the heavens, the earth and all other things; that He alone created the sun and the moon and made them subservient to certain laws; and that He alone sends down rain, and cherishes and sustains life and creation. However, they worshipped other 'gods' beside Him in the mistaken belief that these were the favourites of Allāh and could intercede for them with Him. The Qur'ān has recorded some of their beliefs in some detail. We give below a few examples of these beliefs.

﴿وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ مَا نَعْبُدُهُمْ إِلَّا لِيُقَرِّبُونَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ زُلْفَىٰٓ﴾

And those who take patrons other than Him (say): We worship them only that they may bring us near to Allāh (az-Zumar, 39:3).

﴿وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ وَسَخَّرَ ٱلشَّمْسَ وَٱلْقَمَرَ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾ ٱللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَقْدِرُ لَهُۥٓ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٨٨﴾ وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّن نَّزَّلَ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَوْتِهَا لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۚ قُلِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ۚ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾﴾

And if you were to ask them who created the heavens and the earth, and constrained the sun and the moon (to their appointed courses), they would say: Allāh. How then are they turned away?

> *Allāh makes extensive provision for whom He wills of His servants, and straitens it for whom (He wills). And if you were to ask them who causes water to come down from the sky, and thereby revives the earth after its death, they would indeed say: Allāh. Say: Praise be to Allāh! But most of them do not use their reason* (al-'Ankabūt, 29:61-63).

They also believed that Allāh alone is the Originator of all faculties and powers; that He alone gives life and causes death; and that He alone is the real sovereign with dominion over the whole of the universe:

﴿قُلْ مَن يَرْزُقُكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أَمَّن يَمْلِكُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَـٰرَ وَمَن يُخْرِجُ ٱلْحَىَّ مِنَ ٱلْمَيِّتِ وَيُخْرِجُ ٱلْمَيِّتَ مِنَ ٱلْحَىِّ وَمَن يُدَبِّرُ ٱلْأَمْرَ ۚ فَسَيَقُولُونَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ فَقُلْ أَفَلَا تَتَّقُونَ ﴿٣١﴾﴾

> *Say: Who provides you with sustenance from the sky and the earth, or who is it that has full power over (your) hearing and sight? And who is it that brings forth the living out of that which is dead and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive? And who is it that governs all that exists? They will say: Allāh. Say: Do you not (then) fear Him?* (Yūnus, 10:31).

Ar-Raḥmān and ar-Raḥīm

The word '*Raḥmān*' is formed on the pattern of Arabic words such as '*ghaḍbān*' (very angry) and '*sakrān*' (highly intoxicated) which convey an intensive meaning. The word '*Raḥīm*' has a pattern similar to words like '*Alīm* (all-Knowing), and '*Karīm*' (most Generous). Some scholars consider 'Raḥmān' as expressive of greater intensiveness than 'Raḥīm'. As such, in their view, 'Raḥīm' is somewhat superfluous after the more intensive form 'Raḥmān' but is used nonetheless simply to reinforce the emphasis. This view, however, is not correct. A study of Arabic derivatives shows that the pattern of *fa'lān*, on which the word *Raḥmān* is structured, indicates passion and fervour while the form *fa'īl*, the basic pattern of the word *Raḥīm*, denotes perpetuity, continuity and constancy. As such, neither of the two attributes of Allāh used in the verse is superfluous. Rather, each of the two attributes of Allāh shows distinct aspects of His mercy: ar-Raḥmān indicates Allāh's overwhelming compassion and love for His creation, and ar-Raḥīm stresses its continuity, consistence, and constancy. Allāh's mercy in relation to His creation embraces both these essential aspects. His mercy is not only intensive, abounding and overwhelming, but it is also permanent, constant, and continuing.

Allāh did not in an outpouring of grace merely create a world and then forget all about it, or left its sustenance and provision to others. He is, in fact, continuously sustaining it and His beneficence constantly

Tafsīr of

SŪRAH AL-FĀTIḤAH

SŪRAH AL-FĀTIḤAH

A MECCAN SŪRAH

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All thanks belong to Allāh alone, the Owner and Sustainer of all creation; (1)	ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ۝١
the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful; (2)	ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ۝٢
the Sovereign of the Day of Recompense. (3)	مَٰلِكِ يَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ۝٣
You alone we worship, and You alone we call upon for help. (4)	إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ۝٤
Guide us the straight way – (5)	ٱهْدِنَا ٱلصِّرَٰطَ ٱلْمُسْتَقِيمَ ۝٥
the way of those whom You have favoured, (6)	صِرَٰطَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ ۝٦
those who have not incurred Your displeasure, and those who have not gone astray. (7)	غَيْرِ ٱلْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ۝٧

THEME

The sūrah expresses our passionate feeling of gratitude to Allāh. This feeling overwhelms, or ought to overwhelm, all sensible people who are willing to reflect upon His providence and His infinite compassion, mercy and justice – manifest in diverse forms and manners in life and the universe around us. From this intense sense of gratitude, there springs a desire in the human being to adore and worship Allāh alone, and to call upon Him alone for help and guidance. The sūrah deals with the human quest and craving for guidance that is, or should be, generated in the heart as a result of this overwhelming sense of gratitude to Allāh, the real Benefactor and Sustainer.

STYLE

The sūrah is in the form of a supplication. Its style is not didactic; it does not teach us how to supplicate. Rather, the supplication itself is made to

flow off our tongues as a spontaneous hymn springing from the very core of our being. The words of the hymn are revealed by Allāh, the Creator of human beings, so there can hardly be a more authentic expression of human nature. These words strike the deepest chord and resonate in the hearts of all decent, upright persons. Only the depraved and the perverse, the tainted and the corrupt – fail to recognise and appreciate this obvious truth and feel alienated from it as a result.

WORD STUDY AND EXPLANATION

ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ ۝

All thanks belong to Allāh alone, the Owner and Sustainer of all creation. (1)

Ḥamd

The word *ḥamd* generally translated as 'praise', has been rendered here as 'thanks' or 'thanksgiving', because wherever it is used in the Qur'ān in a similar context, it invariably denotes an act of thanksgiving. Thus we read in the Qur'ān: ﴿وَقَالُوا۟ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى هَدَىٰنَا لِهَـٰذَا﴾ *"And they shall say: Thanks (ḥamd) be to Allāh Who has guided us to this"* (al-A'rāf, 7:43). ﴿وَءَاخِرُ دَعْوَىٰهُمْ أَنِ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ ٱلْعَـٰلَمِينَ﴾ *"And their final supplication will be, All thanks (ḥamd) is due to Allāh, the Owner and Sustainer of the Universe"* (Yūnus, 10:10). ﴿ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى وَهَبَ لِى عَلَى ٱلْكِبَرِ إِسْمَـٰعِيلَ وَإِسْحَـٰقَ﴾ *"All thanks (ḥamd) is due to Allāh Who has given me in my old age, Ismā'īl and Isḥāq"* (Ibrāhīm, 14:39).

In common usage, the word 'praise' has a wider connotation than thanksgiving or thanks. It expresses a blanket appreciation of the good qualities or attributes of a person or a thing, whether or not such persons or things have any bearing on us as their direct or indirect beneficiaries. The word 'thanks', on the other hand, is more specific and expresses our personal feelings of gratitude to someone whose goodness has a direct impact on our welfare and well-being. In fact, the Arabic word *ḥamd* means both 'praise' and thanks, with the latter being its dominant sense as is clear from its use in the Qur'ān in several places. To convey its fullest meaning, therefore, we need either to add the words 'and thanks' after 'praise', or better render it as 'thanks' only. This will convey more fully the human being's intense sense of gratitude to his Sustainer, so beautifully epitomised in this short sūrah.

The use of the word 'praise' on its own does not fully express the depth or the intensity of the human emotion of gratitude. A person may praise a good thing whether or not it has any beneficial effect on him personally or whether he is in any way, emotionally or physically, involved. The passionate cry of the human heart – so vividly captured in this sūrah – is born out of our direct experience and observation of

various manifestations of Allāh's limitless beneficence and compassion. The effect of all this on us and our response form the very core of this sūrah. If this is not properly grasped, we may fail to appreciate its true spirit.

Allāh

Please refer to our commentary on *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r Raḥīm* where this word has been explained.

Rabb

Literally, *rabb* means 'nourisher' or 'sustainer'. By implication it also means 'master', and 'owner'. This follows logically from the primary sense of 'nourisher' because one who nourishes must also have the right to own and to command. This secondary sense of command, mastery and ownership has been stressed so much that the use of the word *rabb* in the sense of 'nourisher' and 'sustainer' is now almost obsolete.

The earliest audience of the Qur'ān, the Quraysh did believe in Allāh as the sole Creator of the universe, but they also believed in various other *arbāb* (lords; singular: *rabb*) whom they regarded as partners with Allāh in the management of the affairs of the universe. That is why, they argued, these other 'lords' must also be worshipped and served. In this sūrah the very first attribute of Allāh as described in the words *Rabb al-'ālamīn* (Owner and Sustainer of all creation), implies that Allāh, the sole Creator of the universe, is also its only *Rabb*, its unchallenged Owner and Controller, for it is He alone Who nourishes and sustains it.

ٱلرَّحۡمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ ۝

Ar-Raḥmān and ar-Raḥīm (2)

Please refer to our commentary on *Bismillāhi-r Raḥmāni-r-Raḥīm* where these two beautiful names of Allāh have been explained.

مَٰلِكِ يَوۡمِ ٱلدِّينِ ۝

the Sovereign of the Day of Recompense. (3)

The word *dīn* as used in the Qur'ān has several meanings. It is used in the sense of:

i. *Religion and law*, as in the verse:

﴿أَفَغَيۡرَ دِينِ ٱللَّهِ يَبۡغُونَ﴾

"Do they desire a religion other than the one revealed by Allāh" (Āli-'Imrān, 3:83).

ii. *The law of the land*, as in the verse:

﴿مَا كَانَ لِيَأْخُذَ أَخَاهُ فِي دِينِ الْمَلِكِ﴾

"He could not have taken his brother, according to the King's law" (Yūsuf, 12:76).

iii. *Obedience and subservience*, as in the verse:

﴿وَلَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَهُ الدِّينُ وَاصِبًا﴾

"To Him belongs all that is in heavens and earth; and to Him alone is obedience always due" (an-Naḥl, 16:52).

iv. *Recompense or reward*, as in the verse:

﴿إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَصَادِقٌ ۝ وَإِنَّ الدِّينَ لَوَاقِعٌ ۝﴾

"Surely that which you are warned against is true, and surely the (day of) recompense must come to pass" (adh-Dhāriyāt, 51:5-6).

The term *dīn* in the sense of 'recompense' covers both its negative and positive aspects: (i) a reward for good, and (ii) a punishment for evil and wickedness.

The fact that Allāh alone will be the Sovereign of the Day of Recompense means that He alone shall possess all power and control that day; all will be subservient to His will; none shall dare speak without His permission. He shall be the sole judge, deciding affairs, punishing the guilty, and rewarding the good and the righteous: ﴿الْمُلْكُ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلَّهِ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ﴾ *"On that day all dominion shall belong to Allāh and He will judge between them"* (al-Ḥajj, 22:56); ﴿لِمَنِ الْمُلْكُ الْيَوْمَ لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ الْقَهَّارِ﴾ *"Whose will be the dominion that day? That of Allāh, the One Who holds sway over all that exists"* (Ghāfir, 40:16).

The message contained in these three words – *Māliki yawmi-d dīn* – is clear: a day of reckoning or recompense is inevitable; it shall definitely come to pass. On that day all powers shall belong exclusively to Allāh alone; no one that day shall dare challenge His will or authority. All these facts are couched in such a way – within the form of a supplication – that a supplicant automatically acknowledges all these statements as incontrovertible facts. The implication is clear: having seen so many obvious signs of Divine providence, compassion and justice everywhere in this universe, who except an obstinately unjust person can refuse to acknowledge any part of this most obvious truth about the nature of this life?

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ۝

You alone we worship and You alone we call upon for help. (4)

'Ibādah

The word *'ibādah* in the Arabic lexicon primarily signifies an expression of extreme submissiveness and humility. The Qur'ān, however, uses it

exclusively to denote the submissiveness and humility that a person ought to show towards his or her Creator and Sustainer. A sense of obedience is also implied in the word *'ibādah*, since it would be a logical absurdity to refuse to obey in practice the One Whom we regard as most worthy of our adoration, servitude and humility. In some places, the Qur'ān has clearly used the word *'ibādah* in this sense: *"Surely We have revealed to you the Book with truth, so serve Allāh, being sincere to Him in obedience - fa'budillāha mukhliṣa-l lahu-d dīn"* (az-Zumar, 39:2).

The sense of obedience is so intertwined with *'ibādah* that at some places the Qur'ān uses it exclusively in the sense of obedience, as in the verse: *"that you obey not Satan, for surely he is your open enemy - allā ta'budush shayṭān innahu lakum 'adūwu-m mubīn"* (Yā Sīn, 36:60).

The verse under discussion also explains our duty towards Allāh and Allāh's obligation, which He has prescribed for Himself, towards us. The duty of the human being towards his Sustainer is that he should worship Him and call upon none other than Him for guidance and help. Allāh's obligation toward His servant, as He has Himself informed us, is that He helps and blesses him. In the first part of the verse, the human being affirms his obligations toward Allāh, and in the second half he prays for the rights that Allāh has promised him. But the manner in which he supplicates for these rights is extremely deferential. Instead of making any reference to them as if they were his by right, he rather confines himself only to expressing his trust, need and craving. As a servant, this is the only proper course for the human being – to pray and to supplicate to His Sustainer, rather than demand of Him his rights. This is because Allāh in His bounty and beneficence showers the human being with innumerable blessings and favours without his having any rightful claim to them, and then He declares that they belong to the human being by right. In a famous *qudsī ḥadīth*[25] concerning this sūrah, the Prophet, peace be upon him, is reported to have said that when a servant supplicates, "You alone we serve, and You alone we call upon for help", Allāh says, "This portion is common between Me and My servant, and I give to My servant what he has asked of Me."

The words, "You alone we call upon for help" are general and have a wider implication. The supplication for help may specifically relate to worship or it may refer equally well to other affairs of life. The human being does indeed stand in need of Allāh's help to guide and show him how to worship properly, and for the power and ability, the patience and constancy needed for this, especially when it comes to obeying Him in all

[25] *Ḥadīth qudsī* is a ḥadīth in which the Prophet narrates something from Allāh – the words of Allāh, as it were, on the tongue of His Prophet, but quite separate and distinct from the Qur'ān. (Translator

aspects and affairs of life. That is a most difficult test, and at times even the toughest people lose heart and flounder.

The precedence in this sentence of the object *iyyāka* (You alone) interjects into the supplication a sense of exclusivity, indicating that just as worship of Him is an exclusive prerogative of Allāh alone, so must all our supplications for help be addressed to Him alone. This is a categorical rejection of all forms of polytheism. After acknowledging our primary duty and obligations towards Allāh alone, we have virtually nothing left to offer anyone else, nor any justifiable excuse to call upon anyone apart from Him. The only legitimate form of our relationship with others thereafter is the one that He has Himself defined and approved.

ٱهْدِنَا ٱلصِّرَٰطَ ٱلْمُسْتَقِيمَ ۝٦

Guide us the straight way (5)

The word *ihdinā* means not only 'show us (the straight way)', but also carries a much wider sense. Implied in this is a supplication for firmness of belief in the correctness of this way, the granting of a desire and a will to pursue it, and to make any difficulties in the course of its pursuit easy. It also implies that after having guided us to it, Allāh would give us strength to persevere in it and not stray off into byways. The omission of the preposition *ilā* (to, onto) before the noun *aṣ-ṣirāṭ* (the way) in the verse gives it all these diverse nuances.

ٱلصِّرَٰطَ ٱلْمُسْتَقِيمَ *Aṣ-ṣirāṭa-l mustaqīm*. The definite article *al* preceding *Ṣirāṭ al Mustaqīm* is known as *lām li-l āhād*[26] and it serves to emphasise that the straight path is the one that Allāh, the Most Exalted, has Himself appointed for His servants. It is straight and leads to sure success and prosperity both in this life and in the Hereafter. All the prophets and messengers of Allāh throughout history have called human beings to follow this path, and it has always been pursued by all truly righteous men and women. It is the shortest path, and the easiest to follow. Though errant and misguided people have forged various crooked byways beside it, they have failed to block it or obfuscate it. It is still there, well-known and well-established, and anyone seeking the countenance of his Sustainer can follow it to attain his heart's desire. Explaining the straight path, the Prophet, peace be upon him, once drew a straight line on the ground. Then he drew some crooked lines on either side of it, saying: "This (straight line) is the path of Allāh, and these are the crooked alleyways, at

[26] *Lām li-l āhād* is defined by the Lexicon (Lane, p.2183) as the definite article - 'al' - "when it is used to distinguish a noun as known to the hearer or reader, in a particular sense". In this case it refers to the straight path shown to human beings by Allāh through His Prophets and Messengers to achieve success in both the worlds. (Translator)

the head of each of which stands a satan calling people to it."

صِرَٰطَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنعَمتَ عَلَيهِم ۝

The way of those whom You have favoured, (6)

غَيرِ ٱلمَغضُوبِ عَلَيهِم وَلَا ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ۝

those who have not incurred Your displeasure and those who have not gone astray. (7)

It is only natural that the more a person loves and cherishes something, the more he tries to understand it in greater detail himself and talk to others about it. That is why the supplication does not end with the words 'guide us the straight way' but further explains its nature, first positively and then in the two phrases that follow, negatively. The supplicant seeks the path of those who have been blessed by Allāh. They are the ones who neither incurred Divine wrath, nor strayed from the straight way. This leaves no ambiguity as to what the supplicant really yearns for in this supplication.

This clarification of the nature of the path serves as an expression of displeasure and aversion on the part of the supplicant for two categories of people: those who have turned their backs on this goal (of following the straight path and being blessed by Allāh) and those who were misled or have strayed from the way. Implied in this clarification is also a supplication on our part for patience and steadfastness on this path, lest our steps falter like those before us who were guided aright but who were deflected from it either through wilful disobedience and transgression, or those who having found it, lost it in consequence of their innovations and distortions in religion.

Three groups of people are mentioned in this verse: (i) those blessed by Allāh. (ii) those who incurred His wrath; and (iii) those who strayed from the way. Let us look at the characteristics of each of these three groups more closely.

The noun *ni'mah* (a blessing) from the phrase *an'amta 'alayhim* in reality refers to the blessing of guidance and Divine law (*Sharī'ah*) that the human being receives from Allāh, giving him an opportunity and the means to achieve success both in this world and in the Hereafter. The clause 'whom You have blessed' refers to those people who were entrusted by Allāh with the blessing of the *Sharī'ah* and they fully and sincerely, without any reluctance or reservation, embraced it. They were truly grateful to their Creator and Sustainer for this great favour to them. They fully appreciated its significance and encouraged others to realise its momentous importance. They were the people who dedicated their time,

energies, their resources, possessions and wealth to its service, and if the need arose they readily sacrificed their lives in its cause. This is the first group and they are mentioned here rather briefly without clearly specifying their prominent features. At another place, the Qur'ān describes this group in more explicit words: ﴿فَأُولَٰئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِم مِّنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ﴾ *"They will be in the company of those whom Allāh has blessed (allādhīna an'ama Allāhu 'alayhim) from among the prophets, the truthful, the martyrs, and the righteous"* (an-Nisā', 4:69).

It is worth noting here that in the phrase *maghḍūbi 'alayhim* (who incurred Your displeasure), the act of condemnation is not directly attributed to Allāh, unlike the case of those blessed by Him. This is, firstly, to avoid any disrespect to Allāh, and secondly, to underline the fact that while all blessings invariably come from Allāh, a person or a group of people are condemned and incur the wrath of Allāh solely on account of their own corruption and evil.

The words *maghḍūbi 'alayhim* cover two sub-groups of people. The first includes those who were blessed by Allāh with a revelation of His guidance to them, but in their insolence and transgression they not only rejected it, but actively sought to frustrate it. And when some sincere people among them tried to open their eyes and exhorted them to righteousness, they rejected and persecuted them and killed others without any just cause. They incurred Divine wrath and punishment.

The second sub-group mentioned here comprises those who responded to the message, but rather reluctantly. Consequently, they soon either lost a portion of the teachings given to them or distorted and changed them to suit their selfish interests and blindly followed their own lusts, desires or whims. They refused to listen to anyone who sincerely tried to restrain them and invited them to follow the right path. They rejected some outright and killed others unjustly. Those descendants of Israel who strayed from a clear conception of monotheism and who digressed from the original Mosaic law are an obvious example of such people from among the earlier communities, and the Qur'ān explicitly mentions them as incurring Divine wrath: ﴿وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذِّلَّةُ وَالْمَسْكَنَةُ وَبَاءُو بِغَضَبٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ﴾ *"They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of Allāh"* (al-Baqarah, 2:61).

The word *ḍāllīn* (those who have gone astray) used to describe the third group, refers to those people who committed excesses in their religion and ended up exalting their prophet as a god. They were not content or happy with the worship prescribed and the commandments given them by Allāh and His messenger. They deliberately set out to forge a whole new order of monasticism according to their own mistaken beliefs, desires and whims. They followed blindly in the footsteps of their predecessors, embracing all their innovations and errors. They thus strayed far off the right path and became lost in deviant and crooked by-ways

of thought and belief. The Qur'ān describes them as a people astray and leading others astray: ﴿قُلْ يَٰٓأَهْلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ لَا تَغْلُوا۟ فِى دِينِكُمْ غَيْرَ ٱلْحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَ قَوْمٍ قَدْ ضَلُّوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ وَأَضَلُّوا۟ كَثِيرًا وَضَلُّوا۟ عَن سَوَآءِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ﴾ *"O followers of the Gospel! Do not overstep the bounds [of truth] in your religious beliefs; and do not follow the errant views of people who have gone astray aforetime, and have led many [others] astray, and are still straying from the right path"* (al-Mā'idah, 5:77).

RATIONALE OF THE SŪRAH

Arguments for *tawḥīd* (belief in the oneness of God)

In this sūrah, we begin by acknowledging that Allāh alone deserves our gratitude and thanksgiving, in consequence of our observation of the signs of Divine providence within our own lives and the universe around us.

Take, for instance, the case of a human child, or even a most insignificant species of animal. Long before it is born and enters the realm of existence, all the necessary provisions for it are in place, with everything in nature, large or small, working towards this end: to nurse, nurture, and provide the necessary sustenance for the newcomer. The movements of the sun and the moon appear to be geared to the same end, as are indeed the clouds, the winds and other natural elements. Furthermore, this provision and care is not confined to any specific part of our material existence. As we look closely, we find that it is all-pervasive and embraces our entire existence. Not only our body but our spirit as well is being nourished. Not only does our capacity to reason grow and mature, but our spiritual life too is constantly enriched and improved. No part of our being is deprived, neglected or excluded from this all-inclusive material and spiritual sustenance.

Our Creator and Sustainer whose infinite power and boundless wisdom is manifest in His creation – the heavens and the earth – does not need our help or support, nor is He in any way beholden to us, and obliged to lavish such care and concern on our welfare and well-being. We, human beings, owe our existence solely to His grace and mercy.

The only reasonable explanation of this all-pervasive providential care must be the unbounded beneficence and mercy of the Creator – the fact that first and foremost He is ar-Raḥmān (the Most Gracious) and ar-Raḥīm (the Ever Merciful). It is His overflowing beneficence and mercy that gives life and form, and it is His grace that stands guard and watches over the well-being and the welfare, the nourishment and the sustenance of His creation.

Arguments for belief in *al-Ākhirah* (the life Hereafter)

Manifestations of such overwhelming and all-pervasive beneficence open up fresh avenues of understanding. The human being realises the

inevitability of and need for a day of reckoning - the day when all powers shall rest with Allāh only, and He shall judge people in equity and justice, requiting the wicked for their evil and rewarding the righteous for their good and virtue, most graciously and generously.

How do these manifestations of Allāh's beneficence and mercy lead us to realise the need and the inevitability of a day of reckoning and recompense?

The Qur'ān at various places refers to Allāh's providence and mercy to show that a day of reckoning is inevitable. Consider, for instance, what it says about the heavens and the earth. Allāh has made the earth a cradle for us, and the heaven a canopy above it. He has made the sun and the moon to shine and brighten our world. He has pressed into our service diverse forces and elements of nature such as the winds and the clouds, and has fully provided for all our needs – apparent, hidden, moral, spiritual, and physical in a most appropriate manner. Has He created all these in vain, and without any higher purpose? Is it possible that He created and then abandoned us, leaving us to our own little devices? Or, has this universe been created by its Creator in mere sport and jest, with no higher purpose or goal behind its creation? Or, is the human being just a wayward creature let loose to prance and pasture at will, with no accountability or responsibility? If this is what you think, the sūrah informs us, then you are seriously mistaken.

The whole creation, with the providential care that pervades it, is crying out, as it were, to make us aware that the care and blessings showered on us are indeed for a higher and nobler purpose. Those enjoying these blessings without any right to them must also share the responsibility that goes with them. Everyone will be questioned about these obligations and responsibilities on the Day of Decision. Those who fulfil their obligations faithfully and honestly would be blessed with lasting success and happiness, and those who ignore them do so to their own detriment: they will be humiliated and deprived that day. The Qur'ān has described this essential fact in various forms. For the sake of brevity, we quote only one example here:

﴿أَلَمْ نَجْعَلِ ٱلْأَرْضَ مِهَـٰدًا ۝ وَٱلْجِبَالَ أَوْتَادًا ۝ وَخَلَقْنَـٰكُمْ أَزْوَٰجًا ۝ وَجَعَلْنَا نَوْمَكُمْ سُبَاتًا ۝ وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلَّيْلَ لِبَاسًا ۝ وَجَعَلْنَا ٱلنَّهَارَ مَعَاشًا ۝ وَبَنَيْنَا فَوْقَكُمْ سَبْعًا شِدَادًا ۝ وَجَعَلْنَا سِرَاجًا وَهَّاجًا ۝ وَأَنزَلْنَا مِنَ ٱلْمُعْصِرَٰتِ مَآءً ثَجَّاجًا ۝ لِّنُخْرِجَ بِهِۦ حَبًّا وَنَبَاتًا ۝ وَجَنَّـٰتٍ أَلْفَافًا ۝ إِنَّ يَوْمَ ٱلْفَصْلِ كَانَ مِيقَـٰتًا ۝﴾

Have We not made the earth a cradle for you and set the mountains as stabilisers therein? And We created you in pairs. And We made your sleep a remover of trouble. And We made

the night a covering for you, and the day a time for earning (your) livelihood. And We set above you seven strong heavens. And We placed (therein) a radiant lamp. And We sent down from the clouds water in abundance so that We might produce thereby corn and plants and lush gardens. Indeed, the Day of Decision has been fixed (an-Naba', 78:6-17).

"Indeed the Day of Decision has been fixed" – that is, all the things mentioned above clearly indicate that every blessing is accompanied by a responsibility, for there are no privileges without responsibilities. Can the human being hope to enjoy these Divine blessings and gifts without bearing his share of the responsibility that goes with their enjoyment? Indeed not. Hence the need for a Day of Decision to judge the good and the evil, to reward the one and punish the other.

The final day of judgement is an essential consequence of Allāh's grace and mercy, the fact that He is *ar-Raḥmān* (the Most Gracious) and *ar-Raḥīm* (the Ever Merciful). As the Merciful and Most Gracious God, He indeed must bring about a day to judge between the good and the evil, rewarding the one for goodness, and punishing the other for evil. For, how can God. Most Gracious and Ever Merciful, treat alike the oppressors and the oppressed, the good and the evil, the rebellious and the faithful, and fail to discriminate between them, neither requiting the oppressor for injustice and cruelty, nor avenging the wrongs suffered by their victims? If human life comes to an end with our physical death, and there is really no day of reckoning thereafter – a day of requital for redressing grievances and rewarding good – it would clearly imply that in the sight of the Creator of this world, there is little difference between the good and the bad, the virtuous and the vicious, the faithful and the treacherous. In fact, sinners and criminals would in such an eventuality be relative winners, for it would mean that Allāh gives them free rein to indulge in crimes or corruption without accountability. This is fundamentally wrong and unjust as it negates Allāh's grace and mercy, contradicting the fact that He is God, Most Gracious and Ever Merciful. It is in this context that the Qur'ān categorically refutes the notion of freedom without responsibility as a slander against Allāh: ﴿أَفَنَجْعَلُ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ كَٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ۝ مَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ ۝﴾ *"Shall We then treat those who surrender themselves to Us as (We would treat) those lost in sin? What is the matter with you? How do you judge?"* (al-Qalam, 68:35-36).

In other words, as Allāh is Most Gracious and Ever Merciful, He will certainly one day gather before Him all men and women to judge them with full justice, and recompense everyone according to his or her performance in this earthly life. The Qur'ān says: ﴿كَتَبَ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ ٱلرَّحْمَةَ لَيَجْمَعَنَّكُمْ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَـٰمَةِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ﴾ *"He has prescribed for Himself mercy. He will certainly gather you together on the day of Resurrection, the coming of which is beyond any doubt whatever"* (al-An'ām, 6:12).

This verse clearly shows that the Day of Judgement is in fact a manifestation of Allāh's mercy (*raḥmah*) that He has prescribed for Himself. The advent of a Day of Judgement is thus inevitable. All people will be gathered that day before their Sovereign Sustainer to be judged by Him with perfect justice. By implication, it means that on that day no one shall have any power or be in a position to interfere in any way with His perfect judgement, either through intercession or otherwise, making the good appear evil or evil seem good. Everyone will get what he or she rightly and justly deserves. This clearly shows that there is no contradiction between Divine justice and mercy; rather, the two go hand in hand, with justice flowing from mercy as its most natural consequence.

Sense of gratitude is the basis of religion

On observing the myriad signs of His providence, mercy and justice in his own life and in the universe, the human being is overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude and a strong urge to adore and worship Allāh and to call upon Him for help and guidance.

The natural reaction to worship and adore our Creator comes solely from our realisation of how pervasive and all-inclusive is His beneficence and grace that supports and sustains us, and that this is not confined to our earthly life only, but extends beyond it, to the life Hereafter, promising everlasting bliss and felicity to His faithful servants. Who else then, other than Allāh, has a more valid or just claim to our gratitude and worship? Truly and justly, He alone deserves our sincerest gratitude and it is only right that we should worship and adore Him, and address all our supplications and prayers for help, support and guidance to none but Him alone.

It is this very deep-seated sense of gratitude that lies at the heart of the human being's quest for religion, under whose impetus he sets out on his path toward God. This is how and from where religion is born in human consciousness.

Fallacy of taking fear as the basis of religion

Blinded by hostility towards religion and all religious systems, the votaries of modern philosophy, however, have been propounding a completely reverse theory of the origin of religion. They assert that of all human emotions, fear is the oldest and principal human emotion, and that it was born in the cradle of horrors and hardships frequently encountered by primitive man when his life was shattered by violent cyclones, earthquakes, plagues, and other dreadful incidents. According to them, it was this sense of fear that drove the human being to worship and adore unseen mysterious supernatural powers which, in his view, were responsible for these disasters. Polytheism was thus the first religion of the human being who started his religious life on earth with a belief in many gods or goddesses.

We have dealt with this view in another book[27] and exposed its weakness. Here we would like to dwell on just one point: which of the two views about the origin of religion is more convincing and sensible, and borne out by objective evidence – the one presented by the Qur'ān or that which is offered by the proponents of modern philosophy? Is the incidence of earthquakes, floods, cyclones, and other disasters the most commonplace feature of our existence? What about the smiling season of spring – the flowers that bloom, their colours, their beauty, the lush gardens, the peaceful nights made bright by moonlight and the shining stars? And what about the blessed rain, abundant and plentiful, that nourishes life with rich harvests? What is our most common experience in life – beauty, joy and God's providence and mercy or disasters and other dreadful occurrences? Considering the creation of this marvellous universe and the miraculous creation of humans, are we peculiarly horrified and terror-stricken by what we see around us? Or, are we overwhelmed by feelings of awe and gratitude to a Most Gracious, Ever Merciful, and Most Generous Creator? Anyone who considers these questions objectively, with a free and open mind, will inevitably reach a common conclusion and express a common reaction. This is because of the fact that both human nature and reason point to the direction set out by the Qur'ān rather than the one taken by modern philosophy.

To postulate that fear is the primary human emotion is untenable and wrong. Fear exists only when we are faced with a danger or the possibility of losing something we cherish and value, and which we feel the need to protect and safeguard. In other words, prior to any feelings of fear, there must exist a perception of a blessing in the human psyche. Once the perception of blessing is established, it automatically leads to a perception of a Benefactor and our sense of gratitude toward Him. This is the natural line that our observation of the universe and of our own human nature should follow. It is through observing and then realising how we are favoured with countless blessings in this life that our hearts are overwhelmed by feelings of gratitude to our true Benefactor impelling us to worship and adore Him.

With regard to the question of how, after once having found the truth, the human being wanders off into various crooked paths, its cause does not lie in some innate flaw in human nature. Instead, it is to be found in the misuse of free will by the human being or in the perversity of human reason when it becomes enslaved to human caprice and whims.[28]

After our pledge to worship and adore Allāh alone and to seek only His help, and our declaration of full confidence and trust in His mercy

[27] *The True Nature of Polytheism and Tawḥīd* (Urdu), Lahore, 1994.
[28] *Ibid.*

and grace, we pray to Him, *"Guide us the straight way."* These words are the very essence as well as the apex of our supplication with which the sūrah concludes. Following this, our expression of displeasure with those who incurred Divine wrath as well as with those who are astray further clarifies what we passionately seek by setting it in relief against all that is negative.

THE NEED FOR PROPHETHOOD

The manner in which the supplication begins is an acknowledgement and recognition of Allāh's glory and mercy. The words, *"Guide us the straight way,"* point specifically to an important fact. Anyone can observe manifestations of Allāh's grace and mercy, and experience a deep sense of gratitude leading him to adore and to worship the true benefactor and to call upon Him alone for help and support. These are self-evident verities and should not be difficult for any sane and honest person to grasp. Nor should such a person have any difficulty in believing in the final day of recompense. An honest person can safely chart his course this far, in the light of his reason and pristine human nature, but beyond this point his steps falter, his reason is helpless; he cannot move forward unaided. He may find it impossible on his own to find answers to such questions as how to attain closeness to his Sustainer whom he seeks to worship and adore and whose guidance and support he needs; how to discover His likes and dislikes in order to seek His pleasure and avoid His displeasure; and how to address his supplications to Him for guidance and support. Further basic questions also arise. What should an honest, sensible person supplicate for and how? How can he find the straight path for which he so fervently supplicates his Sustainer in the words, *"Guide us the straight way"*?

To express our need for help and guidance in the form of a supplication clearly means that left alone human reason is utterly helpless in this area. Allāh alone can guide us to the straight path, and He alone can guide our steps onto it and grant us the strength and power to persevere in it. Incidentally, this also reveals the deficiency in human nature and its intrinsic weakness. In the presence of such weakness, human beings cannot on their own find the truth and the straight path; they stand in need of Divine guidance. A person cannot on his own find the proper way to worship and adore, to follow and obey God without help from God's prophets and messengers. They are needed and God has sent them at various times to teach humankind how to win His pleasure and avoid His anger by following what is good and right and keeping away from that which is evil and odious in His sight.

A SUPPLICATION

As a supplication, the significance of this short sūrah is evident from the fact that it is the indispensable part of our most important form of worship the *Ṣalāh* or Prayer. A famous tradition reported by both al-Bukhari and Muslim says, "There is no Prayer if a person fails to recite al-Fātiḥah in it."

The efficacy of the sūrah

We can gauge its efficacy as a supplication in the light of a *qudsī ḥadīth* reported by Muslim. This ḥadīth shows that whenever a worshipper recites al-Fātiḥah sincerely and consciously in his daily Prayers, every word uttered is received with gracious and instantaneous acceptance by Allāh. Abū Hurayrah says that he heard the Messenger of Allāh, peace be upon him, saying that Allāh the Exalted says: "I have divided the Prayer into two portions, between Myself and My servant, and My servant will have what he asks for." When the servant says, "All praise and thanks are due to Allāh, the Sustainer of the universe," Allāh the Most High says: "My servant has thanked Me." And when the servant says, "The Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful," Allāh the Most High says: "My servant has praised Me." When the servant says, "Sovereign of the Day of Judgement," Allāh says: "My servant has glorified Me." And when the servant says, "You alone we worship, and You alone we call upon for help," Allāh says: "This (portion) is common between Me and My servant, and My servant will have what he asks for." And when the worshipper says, "Guide us the straight way - the way of those whom You have favoured, those who have not incurred Your displeasure, and those who have not gone astray," Allāh says: "This is for My servant, and My servant will receive what he asks for" (Muslim, Kitāb aṣ-Ṣalāh, ḥadīth no. 38).

What is it that makes this supplication so effective? Why is each word of it so charged that it elicits almost instantaneous response from Allāh the moment it is uttered? Of course, there are very many other supplications and prayers, beautiful and uplifting, but we know of none other that is described in such vivid detail. The effect its words produce on Allāh to Whom it is addressed is vivid as is the manner in which Allāh so graciously accepts the supplications of His servants.

The excellence of the supplication

Considering the excellence and importance of this supplication, we would like to elucidate some of its prominent features here, for it is almost impossible to cover all of them fully and adequately.

The most striking feature of this supplication is that through it, the human being seeks and prays for what is undoubtedly the most noble and excellent objective in life. There is nothing better or superior to it. In it, a servant prays to Allāh for guidance to attain His closeness and to show

him the straight path to achieve his goal. As a supplication, it gives expression to the human being's sincerest wish and need for guidance, free from even the slightest trace of any selfishness or insincerity. Secondly, it is a supplication by the human being for help to fulfil the very purpose for which he has been created and placed on earth: to worship and to serve his Sustainer. Thirdly, it is a supplication to Allāh for guidance and help in a sphere where, as mentioned above, human reason is completely helpless, and where Allāh alone can help, guide, and grant the human being the strength to follow the straight path successfully. Thus when a servant supplicates to Allāh for guidance, he asks Him for something that is truly worth asking and supplicating for and from none but Him alone, for He alone can grant it.

The opening of this supplication is equally significant. No better words can be conceived of as its introduction. The fact is that God, Most Gracious, grants His servants whatever they pray for, provided they know how to supplicate to Him properly. Looked at closely, certain aspects of its opening part stand out clearly.

Firstly, it begins with an expression of a sense of gratitude, acknowledging that Allāh alone deserves all our thanks. In fact, sincere gratitude to Allāh is the key to even more of His blessings. As a servant's gratitude to his Sustainer deepens, so do the Divine blessings and favours upon him increase. The Qur'ān says: ﴿نِّعْمَةً مِّنْ عِندِنَا كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِي مَن شَكَرَ﴾ *"As a blessing from Us – thus do We reward those who give thanks"* (al-Qamar, 54:35).

And at another place, we read: ﴿لَئِن شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ﴾ *"If you are indeed grateful, I will add more (favours) to you"* (Ibrāhīm, 14:7).

Secondly, the Divine attributes - the most beautiful names of Allāh - used in the supplication are fundamental to all other attributes of Allāh. In other words, a reference to these basic attributes, as it were, means invoking Allāh by all His most beautiful names, the *asmā' al-ḥusnā.*

The words "You alone do we worship and You alone do we call upon for help" express the human being's complete submission and surrender to his Sovereign Sustainer. It is a declaration that while turning away from all other powers, the servant is turning to Allāh completely and unconditionally, for there is no other power or refuge save Him. Thus, with these words, when a worshipper puts himself unconditionally and absolutely at the mercy of his Sustainer and turns to Him for help and guidance, his supplication finds an instantaneous and most gracious acceptance.

The ending of this supplication also forms a strong recommendation for its acceptance. Firstly, the straight path, the focus of the supplication, and the manner in which the supplication is couched is enough to evince an earnest craving on the part of the supplicant for it. This is because the term *ihdinā – guide us,* as mentioned above, means not only to 'show us'

the straight way, but it is also a prayer to open our eyes to see and recognise it, and to grant us the desire and the will to follow it in life as well as in death. Secondly, the intense attachment of the supplicant to this path is further expressed in words that show his love and respect for those who faithfully walked and followed this path previously, and lived and died in its cause. His strong aversion to those who deviated from this straight path either because of mischief or folly, also reinforces his single-minded dedication to the straight path.

Of the numerous prominent features of this supplication, we have mentioned here briefly only a few. These, however, should suffice to demonstrate its significance as an essential part of every obligatory Prayer (*Ṣalāh*) and why its every word meets with such immediate Divine acceptance. Looking at the wording of the supplication, its format, its outstanding merits, and the etiquette of address observed, we can easily appreciate its momentous significance. It is indeed a most excellent supplication taught by Allāh Himself to the human being, in words so beautiful and in a style so magnificent and befitting our condition and needs.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE QUR'ĀN

This sūrah occupies the prime place in the Qur'ān as its preamble and the opening chapter. It is described in aḥādīth by various titles that reinforce its significance. For instance, it is called *fātihatu-l kitāb* or 'the introduction to the Qur'ān'. Appropriately, it has been given the name *ummu-l kitāb*, or 'the essence of the Qur'ān'. It has also been described as *al-kāfiyah* and *al-muwāfiyah* meaning that it encompasses the essential Qur'ānic teachings.

In our view, there are three considerations which make this sūrah a most appropriate introduction to the Qur'ān.

The origin of religion and the basis of Divine law

Firstly, it explains the origin of religion (*dīn*) and the basis of Divine law (*Sharī'ah*). It answers such questions as: what motivates the human being to adore and worship God; how is this emotion generated in the human heart, and manifested in practical life. It also defines the human being's first reaction to this emotion and how it propels him toward Allāh, to surrender and to worship Him as it also unveils the human being's deepest craving thereafter, and how it is born and awakened within him.

A sensible person can readily understand and appreciate that a sūrah that provides answers to such basic questions does indeed richly deserve to occupy the prime place in the Qur'ān as its opening chapter.

From a close consideration of the answers it provides to the above questions, we find first and foremost that the sūrah teaches us that the signs of Divine providence and grace, mercy and justice abound both within and around us in the universe. These generate a sincere sense of

by the straight path and invite others to it. But they failed on both counts. They neither followed it themselves nor did they convey their prophets' true teachings to others. Instead, they distorted and changed them beyond recognition. This sūrah is the human being's supplication for rescue from the errors of the past. And, thanks to this supplication, humankind received the light of the Qur'ān, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and error. The sūrah is also a most potent supplication for understanding and gaining an insight into the Qur'ān, for seeking guidance in our practical life, and for giving us the strength to persevere on the straight path. All this renders this sūrah suitable as a preamble to the book of Allāh.

RELATIONSHIP WITH SUBSEQUENT SŪRAHS

From the above, the relationship of this sūrah with the Qur'ān as a whole should be quite clear. However, how does it relate to the sūrah that follows it – sūrah al-Baqarah?

Looking at the end of sūrah al-Fātiḥah and the opening of sūrah al-Baqarah, we find that the relationship between the two sūrahs is very much similar to a supplication and the response it evokes, or the acceptance it receives. Sūrah al-Fātiḥah ends with the words "Guide us the straight way – the way of those whom You have favoured, those who have not incurred Your displeasure, and those who have not gone astray". Immediately thereafter follows sūrah al-Baqarah with the opening words: "*Alif Lām Mīm*. This is the Book (of Allāh); there is no doubt that it is from Allāh and a guidance for those who fear Him." It is as if the Divine guidance sought by the servant in sūrah al-Fātiḥah is given to him right away, to abide by and to follow. When a perceptive person witnesses such an instantaneous response to his supplication, he is naturally overwhelmed with a deep sense of gratitude and praise for Allāh.

We must also keep in view another aspect of this supplication. It not only seeks guidance to the path of the blessed but also protection against the ways of the deviant and the condemned who incurred Divine wrath. Sūrah al-Baqarah is thus not only the sūrah of the revival of the Ibrāhīmic community, but it is also an indictment of errant Jews. The brief allusion found in sūrah al-Fātiḥah to the blessed on the one hand and those who incurred Divine wrath on the other, is fully elaborated in sūrah al-Baqarah.

Sūrah Āli 'Imrān can be seen in a similar light. It refutes and rejects the innovations introduced in true religion in the name of Christianity while explaining the true teachings of prophets Ibrāhīm and others, especially prophet Jesus. The fact that in the arrangement of the Qur'ān, these two lengthy sūrahs are placed immediately after sūrah al-Fātiḥah clearly shows that they both elucidate the acceptance of the supplication made in al-Fātiḥah and further elaborate on what is succinctly alluded to in its last portion.